

## Original Research

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# Structural Violence in Korean Sports Community

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## Introduction

Competitions in sport games can cause athletes to become overly immersed, and it can lead to violent incidents. In Korea, structural violence and animosity between senior and junior athletes and between coaches and athletes have been rampant in the field of sports (Sohn, 2011). Although criminal acts under the code of criminal procedure have been applied in many different cases of violence and the perpetrators have been punished, structural violence in sports community is still a chronic problem in Korea.

## Purpose

The purpose of this study was to find and analyze specific examples of structural violence and actual cases of sports crimes occurring in sports to present countermeasures and mitigation measures against structural violence in the Korean sports community.

## Methods

First, an extensive literature review was undertaken to investigate the various cases of violent incidents in the sports community in Korea. Cases of structural violence were found and then legal interpretations were applied to those cases.

## Results

In Korea, violence by coaches, athletes, and other sports stakeholders has often been easily dismissed with assorted excuses, such as a practice, culture, or discipline. The result has led to the abuse of athletes and is becoming a social evil in the field of sports in Korea (Sohn, 2011). Violence between athletes means "a violent event occurring between athletes." Violent acts performed by athletes mean "violent acts, including physical and verbal violence against athletes, injury, fear, personality violation, harassment, demanding goods through psychological violence, bullying, dereliction of duty, abuse, etc." (Oh, 2020). In the Korean elite sports sector, one of the most problematic topics is undoubtedly structural violence. Structural violence refers to the customary violence that is taken for

granted by senior and junior ranks or by the wrong discipline and corporal punishment of the coach (Ahn & Kim, 2019).

There was a sensational death in Korea on June 26, 2020 due to structural violence. Her name is Sookhyun Choi, and she was a professional triathlete. She was the victim of structural violence by her coach, sports curer, and her team's senior members for a long time, and it led to her deciding to commit suicide. This is still a big issue in Korea, and this incident served as a reminder to people to recognize how prevalent structural violence is in the Korean sports community (Kim, 2020a). After the triathlete's death, the Joint Committee on the Death of Athletes in the Ironman Triathlon was officially formed; it is now trying to establish an independent and responsible fact-finding team from the sports community (Bae & Ramsay, 2020).

There was another recent shocking event in the sports community in Korea. A senior athlete in the men's college handball team poured ramen soup and threw a knife and bowl to junior athletes during camp training (Kim, 2020b). Later on, it was found that the senior athlete habitually assaulted his juniors. The senior athlete frequently slapped junior athletes' heads and made them do handstands. The hierarchical structure and the power of physical education are combined due to the characteristics of body-mediated activities.

The perpetrators are mostly senior athletes and coaches, and violence takes place in all spaces of their teams, including practice rooms and dormitories. According to data from the Korean Sport and Olympic Committee (2019), there were 124 confirmed cases of structural violence, including verbal, physical, and sexual in the past 5 years. Among the 124 cases, 16 were of sexual nature and included 2 victims who were underage. This issue shocked many people in Korea. Structural violence is not limited to any specific type of sports, but it is prevalent in many sports (Table 1).

**Table 1. Disciplinary Status of Violence (Verbal, Physical, & Sexual) in Korean Sports Organizations in 2013-2018**

Football Association	Ice Skating Federation	Boxing Association	Baseball Softball Association	Rugby Association	Other Organizations	Total
53 (42.7%)	8 (6.5%)	7 (5.6%)	5 (4.0%)	4 (3.2%)	7 Associations: 3 cases 8 Associations: 2 cases 10 Associations: 1 case	124 (100%)

## Discussion

In Korean athletic society, people tend to think that hardships inflicted on lower ranks by the seniors contributes to better performance. This thinking may have been influenced by Asia's Confucian ideas and the Korean military's top-down culture. Although the Confucian ideas state "respect" to older people or educators who have more experience of the world (Fengyan, 2004), Korean people in sports community might misunderstand the actual meaning of the ideas and abuse it as a violent tool. Moreover, in the Korean military, the reason for using the top-down culture within a strict atmosphere of discipline is to prevent various accidents (e.g., gun accidents, mutiny, etc.) and to work systematically and effectively for preparedness in case of a real war.

Over the past several decades, structural violence from coaches or senior athletes have been rationalized in the Korean sports community because the performance of Korean athletes in various international competitions (e.g., Asian Games, Olympic Games, etc.) has been steadily improving. However, in Korea, Article 1 of the National Sports Promotion Act and Article 1 of the Sports Industry Promotion Act are the only currently existing rules to deal with general crimes related to sports. Thus, it is necessary to nationally enact special laws to deal with the increased instances of violence in the Korean sports community. These special laws should include the standards of sports ethics and sports rights to investigate and judge the various types of structural violence that is difficult to be judged by the general nature of the current acts. These special laws would also protect athletes and provide them with a better environment to train. At the same time, various private organizations should be established to systematically investigate the laws and standards.

## Conclusion

Recently, many cases of sports-related structural violence have come to light and disseminated widely in the Korean society through the social media, especially after triathlete Choi's suicide. Although it is a very shameful and sensitive issue, this could be a huge turning point for the Korean sports community to eradicate the chorionic problem and to create a healthier sports community because regardless of reasons, violence can never be rationalized.

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